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Superman in Delft

Thinking about enunciation with Visual Generative Artificial Intelligence

RUGGERO EUGENI

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Abstracts

English

This article takes a position on several key issues that have emerged in recent semiotic and enunciations debates on Visual Generative Artificial Intelligence (VGenAI). These positions draw on an experiment conducted with approximately twenty VGenAI platforms, consisting in producing images depicting Superman in the style of Vermeer (Section 1). Throughout the article, the technical literature on VGenAI is also examined in order to identify the operating principles that render the outcomes of this experiment intelligible (Sections 3 and 4). This analysis shows that verbal, rather than visual, processing models—namely Transformers—play a crucial role in image generation. These models operate through a process of fragmentation and de-semantisation of the original discourse (training phase), followed by a purely syntactic recombination of fragments (generative phase). Drawing on terminology from the economic-political debate on algorithmic capitalism, the article discusses the connection between processes of *dissemblage* and *ressemblage*. The article identifies three major themes in the semiotic debate. The first concerns the applicability of the concept of enunciation to VGenAI: the article argues that this is possible, provided that enunciation is understood in a purely productive and material sense (Section 2). The second concerns whether the “latent” or virtual spaces of VGenAI can be considered “archives”: this possibility is rejected, since processes of dissemblage eliminate the individuality of the items in the training corpora (Section 3). The third theme concerns the salience and reconfiguration of the concept of “style”: the article argues that, thanks to the processes of *ressemblage* performed by VGenAI, styles are omnipresent yet stripped of historical and cultural grounding (Section 4). The conclusion reverses the approach adopted in the preceding sections and asks how the debate on VGenAI may prompt a rethinking of enunciation theory within post-Greimasian semiotics. The article proposes defining enunciation as an event of production or transformation of forms and distinguishes three broad types of enunciative practices: *productive*, which intervene upon material forms; *interpretative*, which manipulate cognitive forms; and *delegative*, which organise shifts in responsibility related to the other two and thus operate within the domain of social forms. This framework enables semiotics to monitor the fundamental risk highlighted throughout the article: that the *productive* enunciational delegation assigned to VGenAI may be extended—automatically and surreptitiously—to the *interpretative* dimension.

Français

Cet article prend position sur plusieurs questions clés qui ont émergé dans les débats sémiotiques et énonciatifs récents sur l'intelligence artificielle générative visuelle (VGenAI). Ces positions s'appuient sur une expérience menée avec une vingtaine de plateformes VGenAI, consistant en la production d'images représentant Superman dans le style de Vermeer (section 1). Tout au long de l'article, la littérature technique sur la VGenAI est également examinée afin d'identifier les principes de fonctionnement qui rendent intelligibles les résultats de cette expérience (sections 3 et 4). Cette analyse montre que les modèles de traitement verbal, plutôt que visuel, à savoir les Transformers, jouent un rôle crucial dans la génération d'images. Ces modèles fonctionnent selon un processus de fragmentation et de désémantisation du discours original (phase d'entraînement), suivi d'une recomposition purement syntaxique des fragments (phase générative). S'appuyant sur la terminologie du débat politico-économique sur le capitalisme algorithmique, l'article examine le lien entre les processus de *dissemblage* et de *ressemblage*. L'article identifie trois thèmes majeurs dans le débat sémiotique. Le premier concerne l'applicabilité du concept d'énonciation à la VGenAI : l'article répond par l'affirmative, à condition que l'énonciation soit comprise dans un sens purement productif et matériel (section 2). Le deuxième concerne la question de savoir si les espaces latents ou virtuels de la VGenAI peuvent être considérés comme des « archives » : cette possibilité est rejetée, car les processus de dissemblage éliminent l'individualité des éléments dans les corpus d'entraînement (section 3). Le troisième thème concerne la saillance et la reconfiguration du concept de « style » : l'article soutient que, grâce aux processus de ressemblage effectués par la VGenAI, les styles sont omniprésents mais dépourvus de fondement historique et culturel (section 4). La conclusion inverse l'approche adoptée dans les sections précédentes et se demande comment le débat sur la VGenAI peut inciter à repenser la théorie de l'énonciation dans la sémiotique post-greimasienne. L'article propose de définir l'énonciation comme un événement de production ou de transformation de formes, et distingue trois grands types de pratiques énonciatives : *productives*, qui interviennent sur les formes matérielles ; *interprétatives*, qui manipulent les formes cognitives ; et *délégatives*, qui organisent les transferts de responsabilité liés aux deux autres et opèrent ainsi dans le domaine des formes sociales. Ce cadre permet à la sémiotique de surveiller le risque fondamental souligné tout au long de l'article : que la délégation énonciative *productive* assignée à la VGenAI puisse être étendue — automatiquement et subrepticement — à la dimension *interprétative*.

Index terms

Mots-clés : énonciation, intelligence artificielle, intelligence artificielle générative, style, archives, sémiotique visuelle

Keywords: enunciation, artificial intelligence, generative artificial intelligence, style, archives, language processing, visual semiotics

Full text

Introduction

- ¹ A recent wave of semiotic studies has applied the conceptual and analytical tools of enunciation to Generative Artificial Intelligence (hereafter GenAI), particularly to Visual Generative Artificial Intelligence (VGenAI). The aim has been to shed light both on how these systems function and on the role they play within contemporary processes of meaning-making. This paper contributes to that discussion with two objectives. The first one is to identify particular issues that remain unresolved and propose solutions that are at times alternative but more often complementary to those suggested by scholars so far. In this respect, I place particular emphasis on the role of Large Language Models (especially Transformers) within the processes of algorithmic image generation. My second objective is to shift the perspective of the debate, asking in what ways the analysis of VGenAI feeds back into the theoretical discussion of enunciation more broadly, compelling us to rethink some of its core assumptions. This is, admittedly, the more ambitious goal; yet I will not attempt to develop it exhaustively here, but rather to sketch out possible directions for further inquiry.

2 To pursue these aims, I start from a modest but concrete experiment: generating a series of images of Superman in the style of Johannes Vermeer. The intention is to test VGenAI's ability to recall and recombine thematic and stylistic elements that are both distant and heterogeneous. From this experiment, three key questions emerge—questions that, in my view, lie at the centre of the current debate: whether and to what extent it is possible, or indeed appropriate, to apply to VGenAI the concepts of “enunciation” (concerning the operations performed by the system), “archive” (regarding the forms of knowledge and expertise it mobilizes), and “style” (in relation to the characteristics of its outputs). In the concluding section, I consider which aspects of VGenAI's functioning—as its contours progressively become clearer—challenge the broader post-Greimasian debate on enunciation, and how they compel a rethinking of some of its thematic, methodological, and epistemological assumptions.

1. Superman in Delft: an experiment on the fly

- 3 “Create an image of Superman in flight, pictured in the style of Johannes Vermeer”: this was the prompt I submitted to twenty VGenAI platforms between November 2024 and April 2025, with some follow-up tests carried out in August 2025.¹ The purpose of the experiment was straightforward. I wanted to observe how the platforms interpret Vermeer's style—relatively well-defined, given the limited number of works—and how they formalise the iconography of Superman and comic-book and film superheroes more broadly. The exercise also served as a small tribute to Umberto Eco's seminal study of comics as a serial form (1964), which famously takes Superman as its starting point. Above all, however, I aimed to explore the methods and criteria by which VGenAI systems blend such distinct sets of references.
- 4 The outcomes of this small-scale experiment were decidedly mixed. To begin with, several platforms refused to generate the image, citing copyright restrictions linked to the Superman character. In some cases, the refusal was explicit—as with ChatGPT, which I will discuss later shortly. In others, the unwillingness took the form of failure: Adobe Firefly, for example, returned images of winged beings (a bearded man with outstretched wings, a haloed bird, an angel extending an arm downwards), all rendered in a rather oleographic manner and bathed in a warm, enveloping light (Fig. 1).

Fig. 1



- 5 A second group of platforms (including OpenArt, Imagine Art, and Imagen) responded by producing varied results. Here, the superhero was mainly identified through costume and pose, while platforms evoked Vermeer's influence through warm light (OpenArt, Fig. 2) or vaguely Dutch-style buildings with a slightly timeless quality.

Fig. 2



- 6 In some instances—for example, Imagine Art (Fig. 3)—Superman does not actually

fly but hovers in an interior, illuminated by a latticed window on the left. The window floods him with soft light, detaching his figure from a darker background: a device typical of many of Vermeer's interior scenes.

Fig. 3



- 7 Two cases stand apart: Midjourney and Grok (the platform integrated with X). In these, the platforms' distinctive house styles dominate those of Vermeer. Midjourney favours bold, vigorous brushstrokes—particularly evident in the clouds (Fig. 4)—which are far removed from Vermeer's minute precision. Grok, by contrast, produces a photographic rather than painterly aesthetic, making the divergence from Vermeer's style even starker (Fig. 5).

Fig. 4



Fig. 5



8 I left my interactions with Gemini, Google's AI platform (which uses the Imagen generator), and with ChatGPT-4, with its integrated visual tool DALL·E 3, until the end, since in these cases it is possible to ask the platforms to explain the choices they make through short conversational exchanges. In addition, as both have recently introduced new models, it is relatively easy to observe the differences between outputs produced a few months ago and those generated more recently. Let us begin with Gemini. In March 2025, using Imagen 3, the platform produced images in a

vaguely pictorial style reminiscent of 19th-century oleographic sketches—a stylistic veneer that essentially overrode Vermeer’s idiom (Fig. 6).

Fig. 6



- 9 By August 2025, however, Gemini had moved to the new Imagen 4, which brought some notable changes: outlines were softened, the superhero’s appearance became more realistic, and a small mill appeared in the background. Yet the overall aesthetic, marked by a glossy, plastic-like sheen, still remained far removed from Vermeer’s painterly world (Fig. 7).

Fig. 7



10 When asked to identify the Vermeerian features employed, the platform listed four: soft, diffused light; rich colours and textures; a sense of stillness; and careful attention to detail. ChatGPT-4, by contrast, refused to generate an image of Superman on the grounds of copyright. Instead, it proposed “a unique superhero figure inspired by the style of Vermeer”. The result was a character clad in retro-futuristic armour and a face-concealing helmet, standing upright with arms slightly extended, dressed in a large yellow-gold cloak. He appeared against a clear sky partially filled with clouds at the lower right, touched by an ascending ray of golden light that illuminated his cloak and armour and tinted the clouds with gold (Fig. 8).

Fig. 8



- 11 More recently, in August 2025, ChatGPT-5, again drawing on DALL-E 3, maintained its refusal to reproduce a copyrighted figure but produced an image closer to Superman's iconography: a blue costume, red cape and shorts, the classic flying posture with clenched fists and one arm thrust forward, though rendered more as levitation than flight. The style resembled an oil-painting simulation, while the use of clouds filtering a warm light remained consistent. When asked about its choices regarding Vermeer, ChatGPT offered a more detailed account than its competitor: soft, directional natural light; rich yet controlled colour saturation; meticulous fabric rendering; chiaroscuro with gentle edges; balanced composition and a quiet mood; and subtle background detail. It even summarised these features as superimposed tags on the image (Fig. 9).

Fig. 9



12 Taken together, this quick experiment highlights several prominent features of how VGenAI operates. My prompt required the platforms to mobilise and combine not two, but three sets of stylistic and iconographic references—or, alternatively, three repertoires of formal and thematic elements drawn from distinct cultural domains. The first relates to Vermeer's style, where salient traits include: soft, grazing light with gradual tonal transitions; a palette favouring blue, grey, and gold, while avoiding bright saturation; balanced, generally static compositions; meticulous detail; the creation of calm, intimate atmospheres suggestive of suspended time; and specific motifs such as barred windows or clouded skies. The second set concerns the iconography of Superman, and superhero imagery more broadly: the emblematic costume with chest logo; heroic poses with outstretched arms and expanded chest; theatrical gestures such as a raised arm in flight; the fluttering cape; the idealised body shaped by classical canons; specific references from comics and cinema, such as Superman's quiff; and at times, an urban backdrop. Finally, the third set derives from the stylistic imprint of the platforms themselves—for example, Midjourney's painterly aesthetic or Grok's photographic realism. The blending of these three

repertoires depends on two key factors. First, their mutual compatibility, which often requires minor substitutions or shifts—levitation instead of flight, armour instead of costume, pastel drawing or airbrushed illustration instead of Vermeerian oils. Second, their implicit hierarchy, which functions like a rock-paper-scissors model: in many cases, platform-specific style dominates Vermeer’s brushwork; in others, Vermeerian features override superhero conventions (for instance, Superman seated in mid-air, indoors).

- 13 As noted in the introduction, Visual Generative AIs (VGenAIs) have recently attracted significant attention within semiotic research, particularly through applications of enunciation theory to both their operational procedures and their outputs (Dondero, Aldama & Leone, 2025). My super-Vermeerian experiment can likewise be examined through the theoretical lens of enunciation and its recent extensions. Within this framework, three central issues emerge: they directly pertain to the key aspects of the experiment and, at the same time, resonate with ongoing discussions in semiotics—often in dialogue with contributions from adjacent disciplines. The first issue concerns whether the operability of VGenAI can be defined as a form of “enunciation.” The remaining two issues address the notions of “archive” and “style,” again in relation to the system’s modes of operation and the characteristics of its outputs. The subsequent sections address each of these three issues in a systematic way.

2. The delegated enunciation

- 14 The first issue is foundational: it concerns *whether—and to what extent—the images produced through different VGenAI platforms* (in this case, images of Superman set in Delft) *may be considered acts of enunciation*. On this issue, positions diverge. On the one hand, several scholars are in no doubt that VGenAIs do indeed perform enunciative operations. For instance, D’Armenio, Delière, and Dondero (2024) state unequivocally that

Generative AIs are enunciational machines, for the simple fact that they produce visual or verbal utterances [...]. More specifically, we will define these artificial intelligences as follows: *co-enunciating machines, devoid of intentionality and initiative, which nevertheless produce visual utterances in collaboration with a human operator and based on highly structured and reconfigurable archives* (D’Armenio, Delière, and Dondero [2024], p. 2. Emphasis added).

- 15 The scholars’ position lies on two principles. First, they operate within the framework of Jacques Fontanille’s theory of enunciative praxis (2003), according to which the constant process of linguistic elaboration characteristic of any culture “works” on expressions by shifting them from one mode of existence to another: from the *virtuality* of linguistic deposits to the *actuality* of the project lines of a discourse, to the *reality* of a text produced in a specific medium of expression, to the *potentiality* of expressions that have become recognisable marks that are traced back to the virtuality of languages (or discarded as obsolete). In light of Fontanille’s theory, VGenAI enunciates through two movements: in a more immediate form, with the transfer from the *virtual* to the *actual* and from there to the *realized*, which is expressed at the moment of image generation (“ascending trajectory”); in a presupposed form through the shift of expressions from the *realized* to the *potential* and then to the *virtual*, which is produced in their training phase (“descending trajectory”). The second principle is the need for human participation, which, through prompts, takes part in the actualisation of utterances: in this sense, as seen above, we speak of “co-enunciation”, in a process that does not differ in principle from extra- and pre-algorithmic enunciative praxis:

The semiotic forms that inhabit culture have different modes of existence (virtualised, actualised, realised and potentialised), and each new act of enunciation reconfigures them, actualising and realising them in new utterances. Generative AIs, in this respect, are machines intrinsically linked to enunciative praxis, because their work is precisely a work of summoning, actualising and realising the potential and virtual possibilities of the dataset.

- 16 Paolucci (2025) likewise argues that the generative processes of both GenAI and VGenAI are enunciatinal. His reasoning, however, contains something of a *coup de théâtre*. At first sight, the generation of utterances by GenAI appears to have little in common with our usual conception of enunciation as a dispositive for constructing subjectivity through intentional linguistic activity, which situates a system of meanings in relation to a specific speech act. In fact

GPT relies on norms, clichés, previously uttered statements to produce a concatenation that creates the effect of first-person speech, to which we are also tempted to attribute thoughts and intentional states. [In this sense,] *for it, executing well does not mean thinking, because intentional states are lacking*. [At the same time, it possesses] *the incredible ability to produce statements that seem meaningful to a human interlocutor without passing through meaning* (Paolucci 2025, pp. 8, 11, 14. Emphasis added).

- 17 However—and here lies the twist—this very mode of functioning brings us face-to-face with the *true nature* of enunciation. As a result, it prompts us to move beyond both the myth of subjectivity and the “myth of meaning”:

Enunciation is in fact an [impersonal and eventual] assemblage of enunciating instances, and the agency of this act does not belong to the ego [...] meaning is our mode of functioning, and the real problem for semiotics (and also for philosophy) of AI is placing our mode of functioning as a benchmark, sanctioning everything that deviates from it, and observing how different it is. I believe this anthropocentric and humanistic attitude is not only wrong but also serves as a *trompe l'œil, hiding how we truly function and how we have functioned from the very beginning*. In my view, generative AI represents a turning point in our evolution that reveals what our essence has been from the start.²

- 18 On the other side of the debate, some scholars reject the idea that the operations performed by VGenAI can be described as acts of enunciation. Marion Colas-Blaise (2025) provides a clear example. Although she, too, works within the theoretical framework of enunciative practices, as do D’Armenio, Deliège, and Dondero (2024), she arrives at somewhat different conclusions:

While the machine (co)creates, it does not (co)enunciate, if by ‘enunciation’ we mean the metadiscursive act of defining the conditions of possibility for the production of a verbal or visual text, the management of the modalities that lead virtualities and potentialities to the stage of realisation, and the evaluation of the process *a posteriori* (Colas-Blaise 2025, p. 147, we translate).

- 19 The reason for this shortcoming lies in the *lack of intentionality* of VGenAI: in semiotic terms, “Their modal equipment is incomplete: *having-to-do* (according to programming rules) and *knowing-how-to-do* (executing commands), and even *being-able-to-do*, are disconnected from a genuine *wanting-to-do*.” (*Ibid.*, p. 180, we translate). D’Armenio, Deliège, and Dondero (2024) were also aware of this limitation, but they sought to overcome it by emphasising the constant human presence integrated into the process of co-enunciation. By contrast, for Colas-Blaise the para-enunciative process of machines unfolds in a (relatively) autonomous manner, insofar as the platforms construct what she terms a “machinic enunciative sequence” (*séquence énonciative machinique*). This sequence entails the *delegation* of enunciative performances from the human subject to the machine – and their eventual control. As she explains: “[in] ‘machinic enunciation,’ we identify an

enunciative sequence which attests to human responsibility in the initial and final phases, while the middle phase sees the multiplication of machinic instances under the control of anonymous and impersonal forces.” (*Ibid.*, p. 147).

20 Finally—and not without a particular paradox to which we will need to return—Jacques Fontanille (2024) himself denies enunciative status to GenAI’s generative processes. He argues that the utterances produced by GenAI are “chaînes de proto-expressions (appelées *tokens*) extraites de bases de données pré-entraînées par des procédures distributionnelles [...] qui n’impliquent aucune signification,”³ since their nature is *monoplanar*, purely signifying and syntactic. Their functioning, he continues, rests on a “projective illusion”—or rather, “une projection compulsive de la signification”—on the part of the user, which allows meaning to be reintroduced only *ex post*. It seems to me that, in setting out his arguments, Fontanille is in fact compelled to distance himself from the conception of enunciative praxis he had introduced in 2003, in which enunciation is considered as the mere manipulation of the modes of existence and presence of expressive forms considered in their materiality. The latter now need to be strictly integrated with appropriate *interpretative* praxis⁴—to be understood as exercised primarily by the enunciator during, and throughout, the act of enunciation itself, rather than delegated exclusively to the enunciatee. What characterises the (pseudo-) enunciative praxis carried out by VGenAI machines is precisely the absence of such interpretative activity. Consequently, the production of meaning is handed over to the user-as-enunciatee, who reintroduces it *ex post* in the form of “illusory projection:”

[Si] l’instance d’énonciation est à la fois instance de production et d’interprétation, dans un enchevêtrement qu’il est difficile de démêler, [on ne peut pas parler d’“énonciation” de la machine, parce que dans ce cas-ci] il y a une prothèse numérique qui dispose des proto-expressions, et un usager humain qui produit la sémiose en les raccordant à des contenus.⁵

21 As is clear, the divergent positions on whether VGenAI operations can be qualified as “enunciative” rest on three broader, interrelated issues. The first concerns *the very definition of enunciation* and the minimum conditions for recognising its presence—particularly with respect to intentionality, subjectivity, and the manipulation not only of expressive forms but also of content. Depending on how we answer this question, we can either extend enunciative action to non-human agents, such as VGenAI, or not. The other two issues follow directly from this first one: *how to conceptualise the interaction between the human agent and VGenAI*—and therefore the degree of autonomy the machine enjoys in relation to the user; and *how to conceptualise the behaviour of machines*—possibly considered in association with that of users—through the theoretical lens of enunciation.

22 Up to this point, I have tried, as rigorously and impartially as possible, to sketch the contours of the debate. From this point forward, I advance a position in the debate, supported by a number of viewpoints that will be argued in greater detail below and expanded upon in the conclusion. First, I propose distinguishing between at least *two forms of enunciation*. The first concerns the construction and manifestation of utterances; the second relates this activity to the production and manipulation of cognitive configurations. For the sake of clarity, I refer to these as *productive* enunciation and *interpretative* enunciation, respectively. Once this distinction has been established, *I propose to regard the activity of VGenAI as a form of productive—though not interpretative—enunciation*. This position first legitimates the possibility of defining VGenAI’s operations as “enunciative,” even in the absence of intentionality, subjectivity, or a biplanar semantic structure. At the same time, however, I maintain that *the enunciative action of algorithmic systems cannot be assimilated to that of human beings, whose enunciation is*, by contrast, essentially (in most cases) *interpretative* (*contra* Paolucci, although he otherwise aligns with my position in the broader debate). Nor do I share the view that humans

and machines co-enunciate on an equal footing within a shared enunciative circuit (*contra* Dondero and colleagues, likewise broadly aligned with my argument). Rather, I contend that *GenAI and VGenAI perform their enunciative acts autonomously, strictly on the basis of the productive form of enunciation* (converging here with Fontanille 2024). On this point, I endorse Colas-Blaise’s hypothesis that *the human agent delegates enunciative agency to the machine* within a “machinic enunciative sequence”—through a dynamic that requires critical attention, as I’ll argue in the extreme conclusion of this article.

- 23 Finally, from an epistemological standpoint, I contend that Fontanille’s 2003 theory of enunciative praxis offers a rigorous account of the *productive* form of enunciation, while revealing clear limitations when it comes to explaining the relationship between productive and *interpretative* enunciation. Paradoxically, however, it is precisely this reduction of enunciation to its material and productive dimensions that makes Fontanille’s framework particularly well suited to the analysis of VGenAI—an approach developed especially by Dondero and colleagues. More specifically, as Dondero and collaborators compellingly demonstrate, this theory accurately describes both the trajectory through which discursive expressions move from a *realized* mode of existence to a *potential* one, and subsequently to a *virtual* one (“descending” path, corresponding to the *training* phase), and the reverse trajectory from the *virtual* to the *actual* and finally to the *realized* (“ascending” path, corresponding to the *generative* phase). The analysis of issues relating to the concepts of “archive” and “style” in the next two sections will give us the opportunity to explore in depth how GenAI and VGenAI operate in each of these trajectories.

3. The archive: enunciation as dissemblage

- 24 Let us return to the initial experiment. In generating images of Superman in the style of Vermeer, the various VGenAI systems appear to have selected and combined certain elements deemed salient from two distinct repertoires: the iconography of Superman, on the one hand, and Vermeer’s paintings and their stylistic features, on the other. In other words, the platforms seem to operate with and upon a set of *archives*—and, when prompted appropriately, they even appear to confirm this impression. Yet can we take this impression—endorsed, as it were, by the VGenAIs themselves—as reliable? This question is far from marginal. Indeed, a second recurrent theme in the semiotic debate on VGenAI concerns whether it is possible or even appropriate to describe the complex bodies of knowledge underlying image generation as “archives.”
- 25 This proposal has resurfaced with varying emphases across several contributions. D’Armenio, Delière, and Dondero (2024) observe that GenAI training takes place through the “perception” of vast corpora of data, which they describe as “meta-archives [i.e. archives of archives embedded with] operations” of data manipulation and elaboration: “databases are reconfigurable meta-archives of images, descriptors and, above all, operations. With respect to the perceptual dimension, AIs must perform an archival perceptive operation to be trained to produce new utterances”.⁶ The ambiguity here is noteworthy: in their essay, the notion of meta-archives seems to oscillate between the training corpora themselves, and the body of knowledge later mobilised by GenAI.
- 26 Other works by the same authors are more explicit, treating both structures as archives or databases. Dondero (2025), for example, defines the machine’s set of knowledge and competences – what Fontanille would call the *virtual* –in terms of “latent space”. In its original technical sense, this term refers to the space in which algorithms carry out data manipulations that can be translated into images. Yet the

concept has been further developed in a theoretical register. Antonio Somaini describes it as “the abstract space within which complex, multi-dimensional data structures (such as images, texts, and sounds...) are represented in a more simplified, lower-dimensional form, to be processed through different mathematical operations”.⁷ For Dondero, “today, the realm of the virtualised [...] has been concretised in databases and is available for our manipulation (as analysts and as generators of new images from old ones) [...] the database is constituted by all the available images produced, digitised, and recognised in Western culture and it coincides with the moment of virtualisation as it”.⁸ In this way, *the notion of archive extends beyond big-data training sets to encompass the field of VGenAI’s virtual competences—its latent space*.

27 Furthermore, the tendency to consider latent spaces as a new kind of archive overcomes semiotic boundaries. Roland Meyer, for example, suggests that “the latent space that forms a kind of virtual image archive also includes an infinite number of images that (almost) look like ordinary photographs but are not photographs at all”.⁹ Somaini, reflecting on the origins of latent spaces in the boundless and disordered archive of the Internet, stresses that they “have thus become a sort of meta-archive: a key factor in the processes through which the past is recorded, interpreted, and transformed. Despite their abstract, mathematical nature, latent spaces have some elements in common with the institutions and apparatuses that have traditionally played a crucial role in the storing, ordering, processing, and accessing of past cultural objects...”.¹⁰ Likewise, Noam M. Elcott and Tim Trombley argue that “a current and perhaps future potential for photography in the age of AI lies in the transformation of photographic archives—including the corpora of living photographers—into latent spaces that can be sourced for the production of fully synthetic images shot through with specificities from their photographic source material”.¹¹

28 Regarding these positions, I would like to suggest three key points. First, it is essential to *draw a clear distinction between VGenAI training databases* (or the web sources in which VGenAI may carry out specific searches) *and their latent spaces*, since information is organised in fundamentally different ways in each case. Second, *while it is possible in the first case (training databases) to speak of a database or archive structured around the items it contains, this is not the case in the second (latent spaces)*. Finally, although latent spaces are not archives, *some of them can simulate the structure of an archive* thanks to their *biplanar* configuration, whereas others cannot, being organised following a *monoplanar* structure. To clarify these points, I need to summarise some key principles of how VGenAIs operate, and the techniques by which they are trained and their latent spaces constituted.¹²

29 The emergence of image generation with deep neural networks is linked to the introduction of Convolutional Neural Networks (ConvNets or CNNs) in the late 1980s and early 1990s, designed by Yann LeCun for automated image recognition. The basic principle is that the algorithmic device mimics, to some degree, the processes of human vision: starting with the analysis of the smallest elements of an image (angles, lines, contours), and moving up through successive layers of the neural network, a ConvNet analyses progressively larger portions of the image, producing increasingly general, complete, and abstract representations of what it depicts. Building on convolutional neural networks, Ian Goodfellow introduced Generative Adversarial Networks (GANs) in 2014. In this framework, two neural networks are trained in opposition using the same corpus of images. The *generator*, a transposed-convolutional (or upsampling) network, reverses the typical process of feature extraction by progressively constructing images from latent noise. The *discriminator*, a “traditional” convolutional network, performs the opposite task, evaluating whether each image—real or generated—belongs to the original training set. Hence, initially created to improve training through adversarial dynamics rather than explicit supervision, GANs also demonstrated that neural networks can produce images not

contained in the training set. The diffusion of ConvNets and GANs corresponded to the first wave of social and artistic visibility for VGenAI: consider DeepDream (developed by Alexander Mordvintsev in 2014–15), which used a ConvNet known as Inception to produce striking pareidolic effects that quickly spread among digital artists; or Portrait of Edmond de Belamy, created with a GAN by the Paris-based collective Obvious and sold at Christie's in 2018 for \$432,500.

30 A few years later, in 2020, Jonathan Ho and colleagues introduced a second type of algorithmic architecture for image generation: Diffusion Models (DMs). These models train an algorithm to take a starting image, gradually add “noise” until it becomes unrecognisable, and then progressively subtract the noise to reconstruct the original. In operation, as with GANs, they can be used to generate new images—that is, images not present in the training set—, effectively transforming the machine's “errors” into a creative resource. Moreover, this process can be conditioned or guided through text-to-image prompts. DMs generally produce more precise and detailed images than ConvNets or GANs, although the methods are not mutually exclusive; for example, a specific ConvNet architecture, U-Net, is widely used to structure and guide the denoising and generative phases of diffusion models.

31 As Antonio Somaini aptly observes, “What we find across the current visual culture landscape is a series of different latent spaces, each with its own structure, size, content, possibilities, and limitations”.¹³ In fact, the latent spaces of GANs and diffusion models (DMs) are structurally distinct. In the case of GANs, the individual points of the latent space produced during training correspond to minimal variations of images. Actualisation, therefore, consists of a *spatial* traversal, searching for the image—or component of an image—most appropriate to the prompt.¹⁴ By contrast, in DMs, the latent space consists of varying degrees of noise that blur the picture (but also render it potentially reconfigurable). Image generation in this case involves a *temporal* traversal and selection of variants.¹⁵

32 Yet, despite these differences, the two kinds of latent space share two fundamental characteristics. First, both derive from machine learning carried out by and on a deep neural network—that is, a system composed of multiple layers of artificial neurons. As a result, the machine's “knowledge” does not take the form of a database containing discrete, individually identifiable units of information with corresponding retrieval instructions, as is the case with web archives, GenAI training corpora, or other types of artificial intelligence such as symbolic AI and expert systems (still used in various professional domains, though largely outside the spotlight). Instead, knowledge resides in a particular configuration of the pseudo-neural system, established through the weights assigned to each artificial neuron at each level, along with additional parameters that govern the transfer of information between layers. Technically, such systems are said to lack an explicit “knowledge base”, being equipped instead with “implicit, distributed, and emergent” kind of knowledge. Crucially, once training is complete, the items contained in the original corpora do not “survive” within the latent spaces. These spaces are de-individualising in nature: it is no coincidence that the process is often described as one of “distilled knowledge”.¹⁶

33 The second shared characteristic is that, in both GANs and DMs, training involves associating images or image components with descriptive tags. As a result, in both cases, *the latent space is biplanar*: each visual element, however minimal, corresponds to a semantic element, and vice versa. This feature enables latent spaces, even without a knowledge base, to *simulate* the structure of a traditional database. The biplanar correspondence between visual features and their descriptors enables the provisional reconstruction of unitary visual objects, and thus their identification. As I noted earlier, the latent spaces of GANs and DMs can, at least in principle, be mapped and visualised by reconstructing the infinite set of images they contain. Ultimately, if we define an archive by its ability to store and retrieve discrete cognitive items, we must conclude that *the latent spaces of GANs and DMs are not*

archives in themselves; however, they can simulate the form of an archive due to their biplanar structure.

- 34 Things change in the case of a third type of GenAI architecture (and, as we shall see in the next paragraph, also VGenAI): Transformers. These were introduced in 2017 to automate the “understanding” (encoding) and “generation” (decoding) of verbal statements; they originate in Natural Language Processing, or NLP, and form the basis of what are now known as Large Language Models, or LLM:

The roots of the model lie in the 1950s when two big ideas converged: Charles E. Osgood’s idea [...] to use a point in three-dimensional space to represent the connotation of a word, and the proposal by linguists like Martin Joos, Zelig Harris, and [Simon] Firth to define the meaning of a word by its distribution in language use, meaning its neighbouring words or grammatical environments. Their idea was that two words that occur in very similar distributions (whose neighbouring words are similar) have identical meanings.¹⁷

- 35 Essentially, these algorithms start fragmenting the discourse used for training into discrete units without independent meaning, known as *tokens*. Each token is then projected into a latent space (*embedding*) through three interconnected operations. First, an attention mechanism (including self-attention and, in some architectures, cross-attention) assigns a weight to the contextual *relevance* of each token in relation to all the others in the sequence. Second, the model learns, through training, to assign probabilities to possible continuations, estimating which token is most likely to follow given the context (*prediction*). Third, these relationships are encoded as *vectors*, numerical representations in which proximity or distance reflects the degree of contextual association. Initially, these vectors are randomly assigned, but as training progresses, the system updates them through optimisation, gradually aligning them more closely with the distributional patterns of the training corpus. The process never entirely stabilises, remaining inherently dynamic. Generation then proceeds as the model samples tokens step by step, guided by attention mechanisms and probabilistic predictions, under the influence of user prompts and other constraints.¹⁸

- 36 The advent of Transformers in the field of GenAI introduced a new model of latent space, distinct from the two previously examined. Here, the vectorised tokens that compose the space are not qualified by any descriptive content but solely by the statistical probability that, having co-occurred with specific other tokens in the past, they will do so again. In other words, the vector latent space of Transformers is *no longer biplanar but monoplanar*:¹⁹ it is composed of discursive particles (tokens—what Fontanille 2024 defined as “proto-expressions”) whose value is wholly immanent to their probabilistic vector location. As a consequence, *Transformer’s latent space is neither configured as an archive—as training databases are—nor does it emulate an archival structure—as in the case of GANs and diffusion models*. Its monoplanar nature precludes the presence of a guiding principle—the *archè* implied by the very word “archive”—capable of returning component units as retrievable entities within the latent space.

- 37 In short, according to my proposal, the latent spaces of GenAI and VGenAI cannot be described as “archives” (or “meta-archives”), since their structure is not designed for the storage, preservation, or retrieval of discrete units of knowledge. Instead, they constitute the conditions for generating new units.²⁰ The original units of the training corpora—which on the contrary *can* be considered archival in form—do not survive as identifiable entities within the machine-learning process. Instead, they are “distilled,” primarily into the weighting systems of the artificial neurons of the deep neural networks on which GenAI and VGenAI rest. At this point, two possibilities arise. In some cases (GANs and DMs), the latent space has a biplanar structure that allows for the simulation of identifiable units (e.g., minimally varied images in GANs, images with varying degrees of blurring in DMs). In others (particularly

Transformers), the latent space is monoplanar and does not allow the simulation of any archival configuration of units.

38 Having reached these conclusions, we can observe that the question of the archive has led us to explore the training mechanisms of GenAI and VGenAI, and thus the first trajectory of Fontanille's 2003 enunciative praxis model. As noted at the end of Section 2, this trajectory entails a displacement of discursive expressions from their *realized* mode of existence to their *potential* mode, and subsequently to their *virtual* mode. On the basis of the preceding discussion, we can now specify what these shifts entail in the case of the enunciative praxis performed by GenAI and VGenAI: they correspond to a process of *de-individualization*, whereby initial expressions are fragmented into minimal "significant" elements (in GANs), obscured through the addition of noise (in DMs), or reduced to "non-significant" units (in Transformers). The ensuing disappearance of singular discursive forms from the training corpora—technically referred to as *distillation*—evokes, in my view, a broader operational logic widely attributed by scholars to algorithmic capitalism: *dividuation*. According to these authors, contemporary algorithmic systems operate by fragmenting any resource that can be exploited for value extraction, beginning with the dissolution of its individual integrity—from personal identities to bundles of financial contracts.²¹ My argument is that *GenAIs apply this same logic of dividuation to the discursive heritage of human cultures*. I therefore propose, following Raunig (2021), to adopt the term *dissemblage* to describe the dividuative operations that characterize the training of GenAI and VGenAI and the constitution of their latent spaces.²²

4. Style and kitsch: enunciation as ressemblage

39 Let us return, one last time, to the initial experiment. The centrality of the notion and instrument of "style" is evident both in its underlying intentions and in the prompt I employed. On the one hand, several platforms explicitly indicated which elements, in their view, characterize a given style—in this case, that of Vermeer. On the other hand, the outputs produced offered multiple configurations combining Vermeer-like features, stylistic elements drawn from Superman's iconography, and formal characteristics specific to each platform. This experiment thus intersects with a crucial topic in the semiotic and enunciative debate on VGenAI. It is no coincidence that Charles Bally regarded style as intimately connected with enunciation, thereby providing a legitimate semiotic precedent for this line of inquiry.²³ Maria Giulia Dondero (2025: 133–143) has been particularly attentive to this dimension. Dondero observes that, in the case of VGenAI, one must distinguish between mimicked or simulated "regional styles" (for example, Vermeer's style in my experiment) and the "global style" specific to a platform. We have seen examples of this distinction in the contrast between Midjourney's painterly aesthetic and Grok's photographic one. Moreover, attention to style in VGenAI is not limited to semiotics. Roland Meyer, for instance, argues that once a VGenAI system has extracted stylistic patterns from its training corpus, it operates on them in two ways. First, it de-hierarchises and de-historicises them, placing all styles on the same level of value. Second, it commodifies them, turning them into objects of exchange:

[As a consequence,] Historical as well as contemporary, collective as well as individual forms of representation can ... be detached at will from their time and place of origin and the work of their authors. Thus, 'style' ceases to be a historical category and becomes a pattern of visual information to be extracted and monetised.²⁴

Similarly, Andrea Pinotti argues that

The virtualisation process [i.e. the building of VGenAI latent spaces] ... affects the status of style [that on the one side should be] understood as unity in multiplicity (a common denominator that gathers under its label a plurality of iconic manifestations)... [and that on the other side] might be understood as many universals subsisting in the virtuality of the latent space. [In this operation, a specific aspect emerges:] the uncritical assumption of the ‘form/content’ distinction [since] the common premise [of different VGenAI] is that it is possible to separate the ‘what’ of an image ... from its ‘how’ [i.e. its content from its style].²⁵

40 I would like to make two observations regarding these discussions. First, in my view, the question of style rests on a technical feature of contemporary VGenAIs. As readers will recall, the previous section compared the latent spaces of two visual intelligences—GANs and diffusion models—with that of a linguistic intelligence, namely Transformers. It should be noted, however, that while Transformers were initially designed to operate with and on verbal language, they *have recently proved highly effective in handling multimodal discourse*—not only verbal texts, but also visual, musical, and audiovisual materials. In this respect, we refer to Multimodal Large Language Models, Large Vision–Language Models, or, more generally, Foundation Models. In some instances, these models directly extend the principle of statistical correlation from the verbal to the visual domain. Rather than working with tokens, they operate with image segments known as *patches*, calculating their probabilities of co-occurrence. These are Autoregressive Transformers: for example, OpenAI’s DALL·E 1 (2021) or Google’s Parti (2022). From 2022–23, however, the dominant tendency shifted towards *combining a Transformer with a Diffusion Model*, as this hybrid architecture proved faster and more reliable. A key case is Google’s Imagen 3 (2022).²⁶ This is not an isolated example: other systems, such as Stable Diffusion and DALL·E 3 (both introduced in 2023), and probably Midjourney (introduced in 2022, although its architecture has not been disclosed), employ similar strategies. The subsequent development of Imagen 4 (2025) further refined this model.

41 Within these hybrid architectures, the Transformer does more than *decode* a user’s prompt: it *reformulates* it into a highly detailed description, sometimes even into a low-resolution guiding image. It then *directs* and *conditions* the entire process of Cascading Diffusion Models, which produce the final image through progressive upsampling to higher resolutions. In effect, *the Transformer drives the whole generative mechanism*—for instance, ensuring that the content requested in the prompt is concentrated in the central subject of the image. At the same time, stylistic aspects are applied to backgrounds and textures, as recently demonstrated by Ferrara, Picascia, and Rocchetti (2025). To put it simply: *Transformers draft the screenplay and enforce line-by-line compliance, while diffusion models serve as the cinematographers that realize the film.*

42 In my view, this formative power of Transformers over the images produced by contemporary VGenAIs is crucial for understanding the relevance of style within them. As noted above, the logic of Transformer discourse involves creating chains of tokens, each selected based on its probability of co-occurring with others, following the instructions of the prompt. Tokens that co-occur in the training corpora will reappear together during generation, regardless of their formal or semantic value (since, as noted, the latent space is monoplanar). In this sense, the problem of style coincides with the more general tendency of GenAI to process and mobilise what classical cognitivism termed *frames* (or *schemas*, or *scripts*): “a data structure for representing a stereotyped situation, like being in a certain kind of living room, or going to a child’s birthday party”.²⁷ From this perspective, *style should be considered as a kind of trans-textual frame*. Yet, it must be stressed that this capacity does not arise from any semantic competence of Transformers (they possess no “representation” of a frame in the traditional sense), but from the simulation logic of

probabilistic monoplanar combinations of discursive segments.

43 My second observation derives directly from the outcomes of the experiment. Upon closer examination, the particular synthesis of heterogeneous styles produced by the systems inevitably results in an unmistakable effect of kitsch. This should not be entirely unexpected, given the intrinsic connection between style and kitsch: on the one hand, kitsch emerges from processes of hyper-stylization; on the other, it thrives on the hybridization of styles—high and low, elite and popular.²⁸ Equally evident, in light of the preceding discussion, is the role of VGenAI in precisely these dynamics of hyper-stylization and stylistic hybridization. It is therefore unsurprising that many commentators have emphasized the fundamentally kitsch character of VGenAI imagery.²⁹ It is therefore appropriate to complement the discussion of VGenAI platforms' styles with an analysis of their inherent kitsch tendencies.

44 Several recent studies on kitsch (and on “systemic neo-kitsch” or “ultra-modern hyperkitsch”)³⁰ shed light on the products of VGenAI. I focus here in particular on Thorsten Botz-Bornstein, who attributes the omnipresence of kitsch in contemporary society to a characteristic trend of the neoliberal world: the production of truths through the bypassing of cultural traditions. Drawing on debates in colonial studies, he defines this process as *deculturation*: “Kitsch is an ‘alternative aesthetic truth’ [and, in turn,] alternative truths are due to [...] the kitschification of truth”.³¹ This deculturating “kitschification” finds in algorithms a powerful instrument of dissemination, often paired with forms of fundamentalism: “Once truths are disconnected from cultural realities, the next step will be the production of alternative truths and alternative realities. This is the specialty of both fundamentalism and algorithm culture...”.³²

45 In conclusion, the latest observations appear to resonate with those of other scholars. The process by which GenAI and VGenAI reconstruct discursive flows and segments—beginning with the mechanism of “monoplanar framing” described above—produces, as the outcome of generation, semiotic objects detached from any specific historical context (Meyer) or cultural horizon (Betz-Bornstein). Although these objects simulate historical and cultural affiliations by reproducing formal and thematic features (Dondero; Pinotti), they merely “resemble” historical-cultural artifacts without in fact belonging to them.

46 This conclusion offers us the opportunity, in analogy with and as a complement to what was stated at the end of the previous section, to take a closer look at the second trajectory of Fontanille’s 2003 model of enunciative praxis referring to VGenAI—that is the “ascending” path from the *virtual* to the *actual* and finally to the *realized* mode of existence of pieces of utterance—corresponding to the *image-generation processes*. In particular, we can consider that, beginning from the latent space (the *virtual* mode of existence), Transformers increasingly determine the *actual* constitution of images, while diffusion models are entrusted with the passage into the *realized* mode of existence. At the same time, the peculiar status of discourses generated by VGenAI (and GenAI more broadly) becomes clear. Following what we observed about training, their products are recombinations of *dividualised* tokens, removed from their original historical and cultural contexts in such a way that their initial individuality can never be restored. In analogy with the concept of *dissemblage*, introduced in the previous section following Gerald Raunig’s formulation, I propose to coin the term *ressemblage* to describe the process through which pseudo-historical and pseudo-cultural objects are generated.³³

Conclusion: Enunciation is no longer what it used to be

47 In this article, beginning with a little experiment that transposed Superman’s

iconography into Vermeer's seventeenth-century Holland, I have examined three key dimensions of the semiotic debate on VGenAI. For each dimension, I surveyed the principal positions in the field and articulated my own. First, I considered the question of whether it is possible and appropriate to apply the concept of "enunciation" to the generative processes of GenAI and VGenAI. I accepted that VGenAIs do "enunciate," but argued that their enunciation must be understood exclusively in a *productive* sense, namely as the construction and presentation of utterances, and not in an *interpretative* sense, understood as the production and manipulation of meaning. This distinction assigns VGenAIs a specific and autonomous role within the broader enunciative sequence that also includes human agents, who generally enunciate in a "productive–interpretative" mode. At the same time, it does not preclude the emergence of various forms of enunciative delegation enacted by human actants in their interactions with VGenAIs—delegation that is both enabled and actively encouraged by the interfaces through which these systems address their users. Second, I addressed the debate concerning whether the knowledge and competences mobilized by GenAI and VGenAI may be described as "archives." I rejected this claim, arguing that training produces latent spaces in which the individuality of corpus items is "distilled" and effectively dissolved, thereby rendering them impossible to store, retrieve, or recognise as such. Finally, I examined whether the concept of "style" can be meaningfully applied to the outputs of GenAI and VGenAI. Drawing also on the notion of kitsch—as a form of stylistic hyper-stylisation and hybridisation—I argued that we can indeed speak of style, but only in an a-historical and a-cultural sense.

48 Furthermore, in parallel with the development of these discussions, and closely intertwined with them, I have examined the specific nature of the enunciational processes enacted by GenAI and VGenAI. From the outset of this article, I have aligned myself with other scholars in recognising the usefulness of Fontanille's (2003) model of enunciative praxis for explaining the functioning of VGenAI. In the previous two Sections, I observed that the model's "descending" phase—namely, the passage from the *realized* to the *potential* and then to the *virtual* mode of existence of linguistic expressions—corresponds to the training process of VGenAI. This phase entails an activity of fragmentation and de-semantisation of discourse, which I have termed *dissemblage*. Correspondingly, the model's "ascending" phase—from the *virtual* to the *actual* and finally to the *real* mode—corresponds to the generative moment of VGenAI: the constitution of discursive entities that present themselves as pseudo-historical and pseudo-cultural objects. I have designated this operation as *ressemblage*. Taken together, *dissemblage* and *ressemblage* constitute the enunciative praxis performed by VGenAI.

49 At this point, I would like to reverse the direction of the argument and invert the line of questioning pursued thus far. If enunciation theory provides useful tools for understanding VGenAIs, we should also consider the complementary hypothesis—namely, that *VGenAIs and the debates surrounding them contribute to redefining the coordinates of the ongoing discussion on enunciation*. Without attempting an exhaustive treatment, I will identify three key issues that, in my view, are particularly pressing in this regard.

50 The first point concerns the very concept of enunciation and the contributions that the discussions on VGenAI can offer to the evolving landscape of post-Greimasian semiotics—that is, to the period following the (provisional) consolidation reached within the Paris School up to the 1980s. This contemporary debate brings to the fore several foundational epistemological questions: What is enunciation? Which concepts does the notion encompass? How have these concepts evolved? And is it possible to formulate a unified theory capable of holding together the diverse "notions" gathered under this single term?³⁴ In this sense, I have already suggested that the case of VGenAI calls for a distinction between *productive* and *interpretative* enunciation. I would now like to return to this claim and develop a few hypotheses –

that will remain necessarily provisional and schematic.

51 Let me attempt to sketch a broad definition—and a corresponding “natural history”—of enunciation. I propose the following definition: *enunciation is any event that produces forms or transforms pre-existing forms, thereby potentially generating further events*.³⁵ This definition is intentionally expansive, allowing us to include within the same analytical frame the formation of clouds, their recording by a satellite, and the (more or less automated) preparation of a weather report for an app or for television.³⁶ It thus encompasses natural, technical, and human agents alike.³⁷

52 The most immediate application of this definition concerns the production and transformation of forms understood in a *material* sense—whether in the natural world (a rock sculpted by water or wind) or in the cultural world (a piece of stone carved by human intervention; an engraving, or a trace of colour left more or less intentionally for more or less utilitarian purposes). In this case, enunciation corresponds to what I have termed *productive* enunciation. This meaning of enunciation, grounded in material transformations, aligns with the notion of *productive* enunciation introduced earlier. Nonetheless, we may assume that at a certain stage of human cognitive development this material, productive enunciation was appropriated as a technical resource for the management of meaning: a practice for producing and sharing dynamic cognitive configurations pertaining both to the world at large and to the specific situations of enunciation themselves. What was once a “mere” event of form-production thus became a practice for producing, transmitting, and circulating meaning across space and time, arising from the foundational insight that the production or transformation of forms entails a material engagement (and disengagement) with meaning.³⁸

53 To fulfil this new function, enunciation became increasingly dependent on tools and material supports, or media—beginning with the human body and extending to a wide array of prostheses that enable the production, display, and reception of visual and sonic forms, whether in face-to-face contexts or at a distance. The deployment of these tools and devices chiefly involves mechanisms by which responsibility for acts of enunciation is transferred or delegated. Moreover, since this “new” enunciation enables the development and relational administration of meaning both among subjects and between subjects and objects separated in space and time, it also made possible the emergence of cultural memory systems that sustain remote dialogue across different historical contexts. This is what I have referred to above as *interpretative* enunciation—or, more precisely, “productive-interpretative” enunciation, insofar as its pragmatic, productive dimension is not diminished but rather complemented by its cognitive, interpretative one.

54 The advent of GenAI and VGenAI marks a turning point in this evolutionary trajectory, as they constitute the first technologies that not only support human enunciative processes but also replace them, automating the entire chain of prediction and generation of graphic, sonic, and visual forms. In carrying out this task, GenAI and VGenAI enact two fundamental operations. First, they restore the full autonomy of the *productive* dimension of enunciation with respect to its *interpretative* counterpart: GenAI and VGenAI thus function as *quasi-natural operative techniques applied to cultural discursive corpora*. It is precisely this reinstated autonomy that accounts for the a-historical and a-cultural character of their outputs. Second, they offer users a form of *enunciative delegation* that closely resembles the kind characteristic of earlier medium technologies.

55 From the vantage point of the concept just outlined, we can more readily address the other two issues through which the analysis of GenAI and VGenAI challenges and stimulates the post-Greifmasian debate on enunciation. The second point concerns indeed the theoretical models employed to describe and account for the phenomena I have just outlined. In particular, it raises the question of the explanatory potential—and the corresponding limitations—of Fontanille’s (2003) theory of *enunciative praxis*. In my opinion, the success of the theory of enunciative praxis has tended to

overshadow its consciously reductionist character: “Enunciative praxis, in fact, is not semiotic praxis in general. Signifying is an act, discoursing is a set of acts, a network, and an entanglement of operations whose enunciation only takes charge of what concerns presence, the presence of the utterance or the presence of the instance of discourse”.³⁹ This reductionism—namely, the treatment of enunciation exclusively in terms of the manipulation of the modes of existence and presence of expressive materials—explains why Fontanille’s model of enunciative praxis can be meaningfully applied to the training and generation processes of GenAI and VGenAI, given the purely *productive* nature of the enunciation these systems enact. At the same time, however, the discussion surrounding GenAI and VGenAI also brings the limitations of the model into sharp relief. In particular, it exposes an internal tension in Fontanille’s 2003 formulation: while enunciative praxis is presented as a mechanism for renewing the “semiosphere” (understood as historically and dynamically constituted culture), we have seen that the *ressemblages* produced by GenAI tend instead toward deculturation and de-historicisation. As Pierluigi Basso Fossali aptly observes, GenAI does not animate an autonomously constituted semiosphere; rather, it activates “une sémiosphère régénérée, reconfigurable et diversement accessible [qui] offre aux instances utilisatrices [...] une sorte de ‘cognition distribuée rééditée’ ou ‘ré-énactée’, laquelle peut requalifier nos positions énonciatives, par exemple par rapport à la créativité”.⁴⁰ Furthermore, and in the same vein, as Fontanille himself (2024) notes, a division of roles emerges between machines—which supply chains of proto-expressions without any processing of meaning—and users, who engage in a compulsive projection of meaning that generates only the appearance of signification. This “illusory” communicative relation stands in contrast to the “real” enunciative dynamic in which production and interpretation are intrinsically intertwined.

56 Finally, the debate on GenAI and VGenAI calls for moving beyond the materialist reductionism embedded in the theory of enunciative praxis. Rather than abandoning the analysis of practices, it requires an integration of *productive* practices with *interpretative* ones. However, we must relinquish the idea that productive practices occur exclusively on the side of the recipient—whether reader, observer, or spectator —⁴¹ and recognise instead that productive enunciative practice may itself entail an interpretative dimension, often marked by a complex and dynamic reciprocal exchange between the two. This integration must operate both at the social and cultural levels, where enunciative action contributes to the construction of shared meanings, and within individual enunciative scenes and the actors who participate in them.⁴²

57 The third and final point at which the discussion of GenAI and VGenAI invites semiotic—and specifically enunciational—reflection concerns the possibility of accounting for the relationship between subjects and technical objects, particularly when these objects generate discourses. If we briefly return to the “natural history of enunciation” outlined above, we can observe that the technological object—that is, the medium—occupies a dual position within enunciative processes. On the one hand, by enabling and shaping the production of utterances, it functions as a *tool of thought* that, through its material interaction, permits the investment and manipulation of meaning in both the production and reception phases. On the other hand, the medium both requires and facilitates processes of delegation, spokespersonship, and *ex-nuntiatiōne*, through which the presence and productive activity of subjects are displaced onto medium-objects. In other words, while the medium contributes to the articulation between *productive* and *interpretative* practices, it also introduces a third form of enunciative practice: *delegative* practices.⁴³ It is no coincidence that the delegation of enunciational operations from users to algorithmic machines emerges as a defining feature of the functioning of GenAIs and VGenAIs.

58 In conclusion, it seems to me that contemporary reflection on GenAI and VGenAI requires enunciation theory to reconsider its own object in light of a basic and unitary

definition: *an event that produces forms or transforms pre-existing ones*. On this basis, *three types of practices* can be identified, each corresponding to a distinct type of enunciation, whose interrelations vary according to the enunciative dispositives set into operation. The first type is *productive* practice, which intervenes upon material forms. The second is *interpretative* practice, which manipulates cognitive forms. The third is *delegative* practice, which organises shifts in responsibility relating to the other two and thus operates within the domain of social forms. Conversely, this tripartite framework proves particularly well suited to analysing and critically monitoring the fundamental risk that has emerged throughout this article with regard to GenAI and VGenAI: *by what means, with what persistence, and with what degree of effectiveness are processes of enunciational delegation linked to the production of utterances automatically and surreptitiously extended to their interpretation?*

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Notes

1 Various types of VGenAI were used: (a) those dedicated solely to image generation (Midjourney, Ideogram, Stable Diffusion, Flux 1, Recraft, Nightcafé, Dreamstudio by Stability Diffusion AI, Freepik, ImageArt, Krea); (b) integrated with generalist AI platforms (DALL-E 3,

included in ChatGPT4, Imagen 3, which is part of Google Gemini); (c) linked to graphics services or, in any case, to broader possibilities for image correction and use (Adobe Firefly, Canva, Leonardo AI with Flux) or connected to image rights licensing platforms (Shutterstock AI Image generator, Getty Images AI Generator/Generative AI by iStock); (d) integrated with social media (Grok 2, which belongs to X; MetaLlama, which at the time of my analysis was integrated with Facebook and Instagram in some countries and has since become independent; Microsoft Bing, integrated into the multi-purpose search engine that used a version of DALL-E). Below, I will consider only the results that I find most interesting.

2 *Ibid.*, 7, 19-20. Emphasis added. See also Paolucci 2020.

3 Fontanille 2024, minutes 14:45-23:58.

4 I recover the term from Fontanille, 2015, in part. Chapter II, but see my criticism in the note 47.

5 Fontanille 2024, minutes 14:45-23:58.

6 D'Armenio, Deliège, & Dondero (2024); the theoretical reference is to Pierluigi Basso Fossali's (2017) ecological-semiotic theory of culture.

7 Somaini 2025, p. 21; see also Somaini 2023, p. 77. For other theoretical explorations of the concept, see the contributions by Kate Crawford (pp. 20-23) and Noam M. Elcott (pp. 41-45), in Kuo & Lee 2024.

8 Dondero 2025, p. 114.

9 Meyer 2023, p. 108.

10 Somaini 2025, pp. 47-48.

11 Elcott & Trombley 2025, pp. 152-153.

12 I will refer mainly to the recent surveys by Bie *et al.* 2025 and Li, Zhang, Zhu & Ren 2025. Two more comprehensive reference works are Szeliski 2022 and Torralba, Isola & Freeman 2024.

13 Somaini 2025, p. 40, emphasis added.

14 See Carter & Nielsen 2017.

15 See Liu, Jun, Li, Q; Heer 2019.

16 On these concepts, see Prince 2023 and Theodoridis 2026.

17 Jurafsky, & Martin 2025, p. 105

18 On Transformers, see Vaswani *et al.* 2017 and Mickus, Paperno & Constant 2022.

19 As Fontanille 2024 and Paolucci 2025 rightly stated, although they subsequently reached opposite conclusions. The semantic deprivation of visual and verbal stimuli that leads to the current VGenAI has been traced back to the need for technical control of human experience typical of the cybernetic tradition, particularly since the 1940s: see Geoghegan 2023 and Trevor Paglen's contribution in Kuo & Lee 2024, pp. 91-95.

20 Obviously, this implies that I am assuming a specific definition of archive: see the different positions expressed in Dondero, Fickers, Tore & Treleani 2021.

21 I cannot summarise the complex debate: for an overview, see Raunig 2015.

22 "Dissemblage" translates the original German term of "Ungefüge": see Raunig 2021, p. 55. Engl. Trans.

23 Ducrot 1991.

24 Meyer 2023, pp. 106-107.

25 Pinotti, forthcoming.

26 Saharia *et al.* 2022 illustrates this type of architecture in detail.

27 Minsky, 1975: p. 211. On the (admittedly) different uses of the notion of frame in stylistics, see Emmott, Alexander & Marszalek 2023.

28 A useful overview of theories on kitsch is provided by Dettmar & Küpper 2014.

29 I will mention only the most systematic contribution, by Domenico Quaranta (2023), even though it refers to digital art in general. Readers can appreciate the scale of the phenomenon by typing the terms 'kitsch' and 'artificial intelligence' into a search engine.

30 Lipovetsky & Serroy 2023.

31 Botz-Bornstein 2019, pp. 11-12.

32 *Ibid.*, pp. 18-19. A similar disconnection is evident in relation to any traditional practice of "réenonciation, citation et opérations méréologiques" (Colas-Blaise 2023, pp. 255-282). Lev Manovich (in his contribution to Kuo & Lee 2024 pp. 85-90) points out that the 'predictive

images' of VGenAI simply reflect a more general tendency towards decomposition and recomposition inherent in the processing of digital images (for example, through the 'layers' mechanism of graphics software); in this sense, I do not think he grasps the real significance of the processes of dividualisation implemented by VGenAI.

33 Raunig also reflects—albeit in terms different from those I'm employing—on the relationship between dividualisation (or, more precisely, disjointure) and resemblance; see in particular Raunig 2021, pp. 55–69. Eng. Trans.

34 For the distinction between "concepts" and "notions" in outlining the debate, see Tore 2016; the multiplicity of the contemporary debate is well illustrated by Colas-Blais, Perrin & Tore 2016; Colas-Blaise, 2023 adopts a position of theoretical unification, above all by reconciling the differences in scale between global theories and theories focused on the analysis of the 'enunciational scene'; Fiorin 2017 takes a different view.

35 The (implicitly) Peircean character of this definition echoes an observation by Fabbri 2023, pp. 61–66.

36 I take the example from Fabbri 2020.

37 Such events can be approached—and indeed have been—from multiple epistemological perspectives. The forms they produce or modify may be regarded either as documents or traces of the events that generated them, or as monuments intended to elicit new events within the contexts in which they are situated. The events themselves may be interpreted as subjective acts or as impersonal facts. The analytical scale may focus on individual events or on the broader dynamics of processes, and so on. Classical theories of enunciation tended to privilege the notion of the act: they understood utterances as documents and monuments of subjective actions and attitudes, operating within specific contexts (hence the idea of "spokesperson" objects delegated by subjects). More recent theories, by contrast, have tended to favour the notion of the fact, thereby rendering the constitution and enunciation of statements more impersonal. Yet all these shifts remain anchored in the broader definition of enunciation as an event of form-production. For the ways in which these different options have been pursued in the history of the debate on enunciation, see again Colas-Blais, Perrin & Tore 2016; Colas-Blaise, 2023.

38 I explicitly refer on this point to Material Engagement Theory: see Malafouris 2013. Note, by the way, that the term "engagement" is the translation of the technical term *débrayage* from Greimasian enunciation theory: Greimas & Courtés 1979, pp. 100–103. Eng. trans.

39 Fontanille 2003, p. 196.

40 Basso Fossali 2025: p. 83.

41 This limitation still seems to apply in Fontanille (2015, ch. 2), which nevertheless attempts to establish a connection between enunciative praxis and interpretative practice.

42 Nothing new under the sun, really: a theory of this kind was already that of "sign production" by Eco 1976, pp. 151–313.

43 I explicitly refer to Latour 2017 notion of "delegation": see Dondero 2017 and Peverini 2024 (in particular on enunciation pp. 57–74).

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About the author

Ruggero Eugeni

•  IDREF : <https://idref.fr/131130714>

•  ORCID : <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7198-1606>

Ruggero Eugeni is a Full Professor of Media Semiotics at Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, Milan, where he also serves as Head of the Department of Communication and Performing Arts. He has held visiting professorships at Université Sorbonne Nouvelle – Paris 3, Sorbonne Université – Paris 4, and Goethe-Universität Frankfurt am Main. His more recent publications include *Neurofilmology: Audiovisual Studies and the Challenge of Neurosciences* (co-edited with Adriano d'Aloia, 2014), *#Intelligence*, a special section of *NECSUS: European Journal of Media Studies* (co-edited with Patricia Pisters, Spring 2020), and *Algorithmic Images: Postmedia Dispositives and the New Political Economy of Light* (Routledge, forthcoming). Further information about his research and academic contributions can be found on his website: Media | Experience | Semiotics.

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